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Developing a Global Mindset for Leadership Success in Asia

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DEVELOPING A GLOBAL MINDSET FOR LEADERSHIP SUCCESS

It is no longer acceptable to be a good leader in a single context; future leaders must be able to work seamlessly across borders. This requires a strong global mindset.



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In most parts of the world, young people learn about being a leader through trial and error with their experiences in school activities, sports teams, and eventually employment opportunities. University or other tertiary education may supplement this with insight on human behavior and teamwork, however, the experience tends to be within a single country culture and environment. Even in diverse countries such as Singapore, people tend to gain experience with those within the same ethnic origin due to family connections, social orientation, and language familiarity.

While local leadership success is needed, it is no longer sufficient for success in the future of business. Future leaders must have a global mindset with the ability to work across borders and engage with others with different cultures, social orders, customs and languages. In fact, a recent study by Accenture showed that global mindset is highly linked to business performance and employee engagement across Asia. A global mindset is defined as a set of individual attributes that help a leader better influence those who are different from them. While this sounds quite simple, researchers at the Global Mindset Institute at Thunderbird University have found three critical dimensions to consider in developing a global mindset:

GLOBAL INTELLECTUAL AWARENESS

It is important to know the basics about how business is done in different locations due to regulations, customs, or demographics. Intellectual awareness should not stop at understanding the business basics, but must also include an understanding of culture, history, politics, economics, religion, and current events.

Consider the local shop owner in KL who had never worked outside of Malaysia. While she did not have experience working in other countries, she took time to understand the perspectives of foreigners in KL who came to her shop to broaden her outlook. When she would travel on holiday trips, she would always make a point to study similar businesses in other locations and ask questions. Over time she developed a high intellectual awareness of the regional dynamics in her industry to prepare for eventual business expansion overseas.

GLOBAL PSYCHOLOGICAL ORIENTATION

In addition to having the intellectual awareness, it is critical to also have the psychological orientation to embrace the diversity and uncertainty that comes with differences. To embrace diversity, one must be self-confident enough to be comfortable in new situations and be able to laugh at one's self.

Consider the son of the founder of the family business in the Philippines. He was fortunate to have the security of a good education and the opportunity to work in the small family business, but always had a quest for adventure. He took many opportunities to travel around the region with the notion of "adventure holidays" where he

would take on a challenge or try new things such as skiing, trekking, diving, climbing, or other such adventures. From his experiences he developed a better understanding of the cultures, heritage, and pride in other countries. When the family business was interested in finding new international markets, the son was well prepared due to his psychological orientation and openness to build relationships across borders.

GLOBAL SOCIAL DIPLOMACY

Working across borders can also require a different type of personal impact and social empathy. Learning to pick up on non-verbal cues and emotional subtle messages can be critical in working to understand others. Learning and understanding the culture and language can be difficult, but is often an important first step in working on a regional basis.

Consider the manager working in Singapore for a Japanese conglomerate. While she was not expected to know Japanese since her job was focused on the local market, she took the initiative to take basic Japanese language lessons. She also enrolled in a weekend Japanese cooking class and learned many insights about the origins and nuances with Japanese cuisine. While her Japanese was quite limited, she was able to bridge a bit more of the culture differences and gain more confidence with her Japanese bosses. They were quick to recognize her as someone with high potential due to her ability to really understand how to work with others.

BUILDING YOUR GLOBAL MINDSET

What are you doing to build your global mindset? While it might be tempting to ask the boss for a year off to go travel and play in different countries around the world, you may need to be a bit more pragmatic. Here are five simple steps to continue to work on building your global mindset:

1. **Break familiar patterns** – do you and your friends tend to frequent the same places for dinners or social events? Try something new and see what you notice about not only what is around you, but also notice how you feel.
2. **Travel with consciousness** – next time you go to Bali or Bintan, break away from the comfort of the resort and go experience local life. Make a conscious effort to experience places with an open perspective.
3. **Stay current with events** – while we are bombarded with news updates on all our devices these days, take time to not only understand the events, but the history that might be linked to the actions and assumptions of others.
4. **Take an interest in foreigners** – meeting new people at work or in social settings that are visiting can offer a great opportunity for you to understand how they see you and your culture. While it can be hard to see your own culture without bias, giving it a try is a great first step.
5. **Find new learning forums** – whether it is language classes, cooking classes, MBA programmes, or even community events, seek out new ways to enhance your learning with others from different backgrounds. You might be surprised how much you learn from your peers!

By building a global mindset, we can not only better appreciate our role as global citizens, but also be better prepared for the leadership challenges of the future!

Richard R. Smith is a Senior Lecturer in Strategic Management and Academic Director of Human Capital Programmes at Singapore Management University. He teaches in the MBA programmes and conducts executive on the topics of leadership, organizational effectiveness, and strategic human capital. As a former partner with the consulting firm Accenture, he has worked with many of the leading organizations around the world.
